LIVING WELL IN THE END TIMES

A CHRISTIAN RESOURCE TO SUPPORT PEOPLE IN MAKING PEACE WITH THE PROSPECT OF DEATH

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WHY THIS RESOURCE?

As a society we are not good at talking about death, and as individuals we may try and avoid thinking about it. This is made easier for us by the fact that the process of death has been largely handed over to professionals, so we rarely witness it, and many of us can go through life without ever having seen the body of a person who has died.

In many ways it is reasonable for us to try and keep our distance from death, for it is a deeply threatening reality:

- It is fundamentally uncontrollable and unpredictable
- It involves (unknown and possibly extreme) degrees of physical pain and discomfort
- It separates loved-ones
- It is undergone alone
- It interrupts our plans and projects, and may make life seem pointless
- It seems to annihilate those who undergo it

Yet we cannot deal with threat by avoiding it forever, and secular society is beginning to wake up to this fact: ‘Bucket lists’ have entered the national vocabulary, death cafés are fairly commonplace, and organisations such as the National Council for Palliative Care, Compassion in Dying, and the Dying Matters Coalition have brought the topic of death and the process of dying out of the shadows and into the public arena. It turns out that many people, especially older people, would value an opportunity to talk frankly about what is sometimes known as ‘the last taboo’.

What role might the churches have here? In a recent interview the chair of the finance committee of Archbishops’ Council remarked that the churches face numerical decline because ‘we haven’t found a way to halt death’. Perhaps he was being ironic for, of course, the certainty of the resurrection is what gives us our identity as Christians, and the message that we proclaim and try to live out is that of life in the midst of death and hope in the midst of loss. For “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10). We have something significant to say on this matter.

This publication aims to support churches in being more confident and competent in helping people of all faiths and none to explore issues relating to death, engage with their own mortality, make appropriate preparations for their death, and live well in their final years, months, and days. It does this by offering practical, psychological, spiritual, and theological resources that can be used in flexible ways appropriate to particular settings.
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HOW PEOPLE MAKE SENSE OF DEATH

Death is the ultimate mystery; we can only observe it and make the best sense of it that we can. Despite the numerous reports of ‘near-death experiences’ no-one has ever come back from the dead and told us what it is like, and perhaps if they did we would not be able to grasp what they had to tell (Luke 16:30-31).

A Zen master asked by his student to tell him about death said he knew nothing about the topic. ‘How can that be so,’ said the student, ‘a master must surely have knowledge of such things?’ To which the master replied, ‘ah, but I am not a dead Zen master.’

Human beings always want to know why: we seek causes and purposes, and we remain troubled until we find satisfactory answers. When we encounter dying and death some things are self-evident:

- Dying is a process that moves towards an end-point
- This process may be more or less peaceful
- Death appears somewhat like sleep
- Death involves physical decay
- Death means that the deceased is no longer with us

It is all deeply perplexing, and we draw on what we know to make sense of this great unknown. So, some see

- Dying as a kind of labour, and therefore death as a kind of rebirth
- Death as a final, well deserved, peaceful sleep
- Death as the next phase in the deceased’s journey
  - A pilgrimage
  - A heroic quest
  - Another chance to right wrongs
- Death as a return to the place from where the deceased first came
  - The stars
  - The earth
  - Parents or ancestors
- Death as liberation from captivity

We find such metaphors - commonly expressed in poetry, music, and images from nature - plausible even in the face of the self-evident bodily decay of the deceased. This is because most people (not just those who would describe themselves as religious) have little difficulty believing in the possibility of disembodied spirits. This seems to be part of our evolutionary heritage: our basic human psychology makes us ‘intuitive dualists’.

Death rituals across the world are ways of acting out these sorts of metaphors, often all mixed up together. These rituals support us in our need to put the deceased in the right place, both in terms of physical space (scattering Dad’s ashes on the golf course where he spent so many happy hours), and in terms of our own psychology (knowing that my beloved wife is no longer physically present but that there is a special place in my mind where I can – as it were – still be with her). Because the mental processes involved are very complex this ‘placing’ takes time – perhaps several years (which is, for example, why there may be quite a long delay before a family is ready to inter or scatter ashes). It can’t be rushed, and it won’t all be sorted at the funeral.

1 Quoted by Michael Barbato in E. Mackinlay. ‘Aging, spirituality and palliative care’, p.112
LIVING WELL IN THE END TIMES

‘The end times’ is a phrase that is usually associated with the *eschaton* – the time when the current age ends and the new age begins, and when the values of earth give way to the values of heaven. Christians believe that in his life, death, and resurrection Jesus inaugurated the end times; but in our busy and settled life we sometimes lose sight of this. Yet, as death comes closer through illness or the ageing process we all enter our own ‘end times’; we approach the threshold of eternity, and this may focus our mind on the question of how to live well in this final period. This involves looking back and letting go; savouring the present; and looking forward in hope. All of these can be supported by churches.

HELPING PEOPLE TO LOOK BACK AND LET GO

**Making a will** is often the first step in facing up to the fact that you can’t take it with you, and as such it can be considered a spiritual exercise. However, as many of us will have experienced, some people try to keep control from beyond the grave by writing their will or appointing executors in such a way as to sow family divisions for generations. It is advisable (though not legally required) to have help from a solicitor when making a will. It is necessary to choose an executor (somebody reliable, not necessarily a family member) and name him or her in the will, and when it is finally signed this must be witnessed by two people who are not beneficiaries and who also need to sign it. It is a good idea to review one’s will about once every 10 years.

**Lasting Power of Attorney (LPA)** is a document in which you authorise two or more named individuals to act in your interests in the event that you become ‘incapable’ (this is a technical use of the word as found in the Mental Capacity Act of 2005). The individuals acting for you are called ‘attorneys’. You can make an LPA for decisions about your property and finances OR your health and general welfare. It is advisable for LPAs to be drawn up by a solicitor and registered with the ‘Public Guardian’.

A church could offer the opportunity to talk with a carefully selected local solicitor about wills and LPAs, or at least provide literature, and a confidential listening ear. This can be hugely helpful and reassuring and it can be the focus for pastoral reflection and discussion.

**Life story work** is a key part of looking back towards the end of life. It is a process of drawing all the different threads of our life together to form a coherent and meaningful narrative - of saying ‘this is and has been me’. We tell and re-tell key incidents in our life; we reflect on the significant relationships; we invoke the wisdom of hindsight. In order to have a chance of departing in peace – of saying, like Jesus, ‘It is finished’- we need to believe that we did a good job of things, or at least the best we could. Stories are best constructed as conversations, and so providing the time and space for people’s life stories to be heard is a key part of ministry in this area. You can simply listen, or you could encourage individuals to write their reminiscences down in the form of a scrapbook. This could form the focus of some intergenerational work in which young people from your church or a local school work with older people to type up written material or scan old photographs. The process of writing the story is deeply helpful, but the story will be useful in its own right if the individual moves into a care facility where s/he is not known or cannot easily communicate. It can also be a precious legacy for loved ones, including ‘a people yet unborn’ (Psalm 22:31).

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Memory boxes are perhaps even more helpful than life story books in capturing the multiple facets of a person’s identity; they are less linear and less dependent on words. A robust cardboard box the size of a large shoe box will do. It can be covered and decorated in keeping with the individual’s personality. Placed inside are objects with sentimental value or which say something significant about the individual’s tastes, relationships, and roles from across the whole lifespan. For example, in my memory box are small toys belonging to my children, a treasured gift from my husband, my NHS identity badge, a scanned version of an old photo kept for years in my father’s wallet, pebbles from a favourite beach, much loved books and sheet music, my recipe for Christmas cake etc. It is good to include some things that are pleasant to hold and that have evocative scents. A note explaining the significance of the contents is also helpful. Deciding what to put in this limited space can help an individual work out what are the essential aspects of ‘who I am and have been’. 
HELPING PEOPLE TO SAVOUR THE PRESENT

Going on growing is important even at the end of life and in the context of frailty and limitation. People can be encouraged to keep stretching themselves in small everyday ways. They can be supported in identifying and achieving a cherished ambition such as a holiday or pilgrimage, or in completing some unfinished business such as writing a conciliatory letter to an estranged family member.

Gratitude for a lifetime’s wisdom can be cultivated, for example, by asking an individual what advice they would like to pass on to the next generation. One way that this could be developed is to take pieces of wisdom from a group of people in their last years or months and incorporate them into a prayer space in a school or church.

The spiritual benefits of being ‘over the hill’ should be acknowledged. Towards the end of life, in the midst of bodily losses and hardship, we may find that we have reached a spiritual mountain top and can see vistas that were previously hidden from our view, that like Simeon and Anna, ‘In the last days...your old men shall dream dreams.’ (Acts 2:17). To use a Celtic phrase, we may find ourselves in a ‘thin place’, where heaven is touching earth. Such places are often signified by the appearance of angelic beings in the Bible. In this sense, approaching our earthly end can have a prophetic dimension. Spiritual insights, dreams, and visions that happen in this period of life should be seriously attended to, received, and cherished by the wider church community.
Helping People to Look Forward in Hope

Planning one’s funeral both helps in the process of facing up to what is coming and (if not over-prescriptive) can be a gift to those left behind. The idea that a funeral is a conversation between the deceased, the mourners, and God can be helpful. Choosing music, poetry, or Bible readings can be enjoyable, especially when done in a group, and can be the focus for reminiscence and spiritual stories. A written record of these choices, perhaps including who should do what, can be kept in a safe place that should be communicated to relatives. Funeral directors offer very helpful advice on what to do at the time of death, and on the options for burial and cremation. Many have pre-payment plans, which can be reassuring for those who are anxious (and potentially ashamed) about the financial aspects. Churches could organise events where people can meet a funeral director for a Q and A session.

Making informed choices about dying and communicating them to family and health and social care professionals is an important aspect of embracing a good death. People can be supported in exploring fully the options for end of life care (for example hospice, community hospital, home palliative care packages), and also in making an Advance Decision. This is basically a living will that can be part of an individual’s medical care plan. It sets out their wishes regarding the use of antibiotics, artificial ventilation, or attempts to resuscitate and so on, in circumstances when they are unable to communicate. It is not the same as assisted dying (which is currently illegal in the UK), and this always needs to be made clear in any discussion. It is best to construct an advance decision in consultation with one’s doctor, but additional pastoral support and further theological reflection is often needed, and churches could provide this.

Spiritual care at the time of death should be discussed in advance and can be written into the nursing end of life care plan, so that palliative care professionals are, for example, made aware that the presence of a minister is desired. The option of anointing with oil can be explained and demonstrated, and people can be made familiar with the prayers for the dying, which are comforting rather than frightening. Choices of music, poetry, sacred or secular stories ‘to go out to’ can also be made.

Details of organisations that provide resources in all these areas are given on page 19.
LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF SO THAT YOU CAN HELP OTHERS

The safety instructions to air passengers always include this detail: ‘Make sure that your own oxygen mask is fitted correctly before trying to help others.’ We need to be in a reasonably strong place if we are going to support people in exploring the physicality of death, and we need to have some genuine hope in the face of death if we are to offer authentic spiritual support. So, if you have recently been bereaved this may not be a good time for you to involve yourself with this work; you may need to discipline yourself to wait, even if your first instinct is to jump right in. When the time is right try to ensure that the following things are in place.

**Supervision** from someone who is experienced in pastoral care or counselling, with whom you can in confidence talk through problems, play with ideas, and share the inevitable feelings that arise. You may not meet very often but knowing that there is a wise mentor available at the end of a phone is very helpful.

**At least one co-worker** with whom you can pray, plan activities and events, and run any group sessions. You should also be able to offer each other mutual support and feedback, and keep each other alert to any safeguarding issues. Remember that Jesus sent out his disciples in pairs (Luke 10:1).

**Enough time** for you to process the thoughts and feelings that are likely to be shared with you. This means that you should not try and squeeze conversations about death in between other appointments. You may find it helpful to schedule a relaxing activity such as jogging, meditation, a bath, or something creative for yourself before or after these conversations.

**Honesty** with yourself about your own attitude to death and your beliefs (and doubts) about what comes next. Your role is to be a reliable presence alongside people in their uncertainty, not to have all the answers. It is to do what you can to help, point people towards experts when necessary, but also to accept that many things cannot be simply fixed in this life.
FACING THE UNKNOWN - IT’S OK NOT TO KNOW

Christian hope for this life and life beyond the grave is based on the absolute certainty of the resurrection of Christ, but we simply do not know the details of what to expect. The New Testament writers provide us with a number of images and ideas, some of which seem to be in tension with each other, but these can only be ‘signposts pointing into a bright mist’. Over the centuries these signposts have been woven together by the church into a best guess as to what happens when we die.

HEAD BELIEF: THE BASIC CHRISTIAN TEACHINGS TO WHICH WE MAY ASSENT

• Immediately on death human beings go to a place of rest where they are in communion with the Godhead. Their biological bodies decay, but they continue to exist.
• On the Last Day, when Christ appears in glory and heaven is married with earth, those who are in Christ rise with new eternal bodies.
• Then there is (purgation and) judgment by Christ.

It is important to know these teachings (some of which are still debated among Christians); but it is not easy to explain them to others, and we may ourselves find it hard to make complete sense of them or feel fully convinced by them.

HEART FAITH: THE INNER CONVICTIONS WE MAY FEEL TO BE TRUE

• God is love: God wants to give us our hearts’ desire.
• God is with us: God will never let us go.
• God is just and knows each person’s back-story: God is not cruel or capricious.
• God has acted decisively in Jesus to redeem the world: The facts are friendly.
• The body is precious and important: In Jesus God has sanctified human beings.

We each feel convictions like these about God’s character, based on our experience and our theological reflection. We can communicate them with confidence to others (and they will be received as authentic), even when we don’t have our detailed head beliefs fully sorted out.

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THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH - DEALING WITH GRIEF AND DEATH ANXIETY

Death calls up strong feelings in both individuals and communities. There is the obvious yearning and deep sadness at the loss of a loved one that can sometimes turn into depression. But there can also be terror caused by witnessing a traumatic death (whether violent or due to natural causes) that can easily turn into terror at the prospect of our own death. In order to make sure that we are not overwhelmed by these feelings we engage in a whole range of coping strategies:

- **Distraction** Keeping busy (this is easy in the early weeks after a death because there is so much practical stuff to sort out)
- **Rationalisation** Talking about death as an idea while keeping it at an emotional distance
- **Humour** Outfacing death by treating it as something mundane and ridiculous, for example ‘kicking the bucket’
- **Self sedation** Using alcohol or prescription drugs to take the edge off painful feelings
- **Denial** Refusing to mourn the death of a loved one and insisting on celebrating his/her life
- **Avoidance** ‘Not getting around to’ making a will or saying important things to our loved ones
- **Using the energy to take control and fight back** Actively supporting projects aimed at keeping death at bay (for example ‘Race for Life’)

**ALL OF THESE WAYS OF COPING ARE HEALTHY AND HELPFUL IN THEIR PLACE.** They conserve emotional energy when there are other more urgent demands (such as child care) to attend to, and they can give us dignity by helping us to keep standing when we feel in danger of going under. But some of them (for example relying on alcohol) can cause further problems, and if we are to face up to the reality of our own mortality we need to set them all aside, at least for a while. This is a piece of work that takes up a significant amount of mental and physical energy. It should not be forced or rushed, and the right conditions need to be in place:

- We need to be feeling relatively strong and generally unstressed
- We need to feel that the context in which we confront our fears is relatively safe
HOLDING UNPLEASANT FEELINGS: KEEP CALM AND CARRY ON

When working pastorally with people who are engaging with the prospect of their own death you will need to give out signals that they will be ‘held’ as they experience and struggle with distressing feelings. You will not rub their noses in these feelings, but will instead support them in regulating themselves as they establish their own balance between raw emotion and coping strategies such as humour and practical chat. You will need to go with their flow. **YOU ARE NOT DOING THERAPY**, but you should also be aware of some psychological principles relating to anxiety:

**Reciprocal inhibition** is where two activities work against each other: we cannot eat or play when we are afraid. Conversely, research has shown that eating nice food and a playful ambience both reduce fear. As someone once put it, ‘If you’re eating cake you know you’re not dead.’ This should inform the way you craft an encounter or event.

**Habituation** is the biologically based process whereby when we confront the thing we fear (best done in gradual small steps) our anxiety level initially shoots up but then fairly quickly starts to decrease and becomes manageable, and we feel a sense of mastery and achievement. **This nearly always happens.** Part of holding anxiety is trusting that this process of ‘familiarity breeds contempt’ is at work:

![Graph showing the process of habituation]

**Sensitisation** is the opposite process where, for no obvious reason, when we confront the thing we fear our anxiety shoots up to a distressing level and we end up more afraid. This is at work when people are re-traumatised by talking about something they thought they had dealt with. **It doesn’t happen often, but it is good to be aware of it.** If it does happen, reassure the person that his anxiety will eventually settle (which it should); respect his desire to end a conversation or withdraw from a programme or event; try and see him at a later date to make sure he is OK and, if you are concerned, encourage him to talk to his GP.
THOSE DIFFICULT QUESTIONS

When people ask questions about life after death they are usually less interested in theology and philosophy, and more likely to have a personal agenda. It is always a good idea to find out a bit more about what this is by responding ‘What makes you ask that?’ or ‘Why does that idea give you hope?’ (It will also buy you some thinking and praying time!)

WILL I SEE MY LOVED ONES AGAIN IN THE NEXT LIFE?

While Jesus’ words about the resurrection indicate that things will be profoundly different (Matthew 22:29-30), he does not say that we will be separated from our loved ones. St. Paul says that ‘we will be together with them’ (1 Thessalonians 4:17) at Christ’s second coming, precisely because he does not want his readers to ‘grieve as others do who have no hope’ (v.13). It may be helpful to tell a widow(er) that the modern marriage service words ‘til death do us part’ were probably originally ‘til death us depart’, and do not signify a final separation.

AM I/WAS MY LOVED ONE GOOD ENOUGH TO FACE MY MAKER JUST AS WE ARE?

This worry lies behind the resurgence of interest in the mediaeval notion of purgatory or related ideas about a process of continuing self-improvement after death, neither of which have biblical support. It may be helpful to stress the idea of ‘faith not works’ to Christians who are familiar with this idea. More broadly, the emphasis of the gospel is on God’s seeking out those who are lost more than their finding their way to him (Luke 19:10); Luke 15 offers a really helpful way of exploring this. The incident of the thief on the cross (Luke 23:42-43) tells us that at the end of life the most unlikely people can do private business with God of which we are unaware.

MY LOVED ONE COMMITTED SUICIDE – WHERE IS S/HE?

There is an ancient Christian tradition that in the darkness of Holy Saturday Jesus descended to preach to the ‘spirits in prison’ (1 Peter 3:19; see also Matthew 12:40; Ephesians 4:9). It is referred to in the Apostles’ Creed and was the basis of the mediaeval idea of the ‘harrowing of hell’. Whatever we make of this, it opens up the vitally important notion that there is nowhere so dark and wretched that it is beyond the redeeming reach of God in Christ.
WHAT ABOUT ASSISTED DYING? 5

There are profound disagreements about this issue both within the church and in wider society. The theological arguments against it rest on the idea that life is a gift from God (Genesis 2:7) and that only God can take it back through natural processes, it is not ours to give back. The theological arguments in favour of it rest on the idea that God is compassionate and is not in the business of burdening his people (Luke 11:46; Matthew 11:28-30). An open attitude to the issue is pastorally appropriate, even if you have strong personal views. If a vulnerable person raises this question, it is wise to probe further, as there may be safeguarding implications.

IS THERE A HELL AND, IF SO, WHO GOES THERE?

There is no getting away from the fact that Jesus talked about hell in very vivid terms. However, his words are always in the context of God’s ultimate judgment of those in power who have exploited or neglected the weak (e.g. Matthew 18:23-35; Luke 16:19-31). It is all about God’s justice. The parable of the wheat and the tares (Matthew 13:24-30) tells us that we cannot know what the final reckoning will involve other than that it will be fair, and so it is not good for us to judge or speculate. What we do know is that Christ will recognise his own, and that this will include ‘other sheep that do not belong to this fold’ (John 10:16).

WHAT ABOUT STILLBORN BABIES AND LATE MISCARRIAGES?

Jesus said ‘Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.’ (Mark 10:13). He did not qualify this statement with a demand for baptism. The New Testament is clear: infants have a special place in the heart of God.

IS IT OK TO PRAY FOR DECEASED LOVED ONES?

Intercession is turning to God with people on our heart and, as our loved ones do not cease to exist at death, it makes sense to pray for them too. If we believe that they are already in some sort of communion with God we can also pray with them as part of the ‘Communion of Saints.’ Within the Eucharist the Sanctus can become a focus for this, as can All Saints’ Day.

5 http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2014-15/assisteddying.html
MEETING PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE

In our postmodern, largely secularised society people pay more attention to their personal spiritual instincts about death and dying than to the received wisdom of the churches. Some of these (such as the existence of disembodied spirits of deceased loved ones) may seem at odds with Christian teaching. However, it is vital that the churches find a language of word, symbol, and ritual to speak into this place, both to meet the immediate pastoral needs of those we serve and to articulate the gospel effectively in the wider marketplace. In this area we mainly use ‘as if’ thinking, and it may be good to use the phrase ‘It’s as if’ intentionally.

DYING AS A KIND OF LABOUR AND DEATH AS REBIRTH

This image is important in dealing with the physical rigours of the dying process, framing these as a piece of work with a point. It is a good metaphor within which to discuss the pain and distress that an individual may have witnessed or may fear. There are resonances with biblical themes of the transformation of human grief (John 16:21) and of the transformation of the whole cosmos of which human redemption is a part (Romans 8:22). The safe delivery of the deceased into caring hands (Luke 16:22) is completely compatible with Jesus’ teaching on the loving parenthood of God (e.g. Matthew 10:29-31). For some, the baptismal theme of dying with Christ in order to be raised to new life will be important (Romans 6:4).

DEATH AS A FINAL, WELL DESERVED, PEACEFUL SLEEP

When a life has been well lived, or if an individual has suffered or is suffering greatly in life or in dying, this image is deeply appealing. Death as sleep is a biblical metaphor (John 11:11), but the idea of waking from sleep is much more common. It may be helpful to explore the feeling of waking well-rested from sleep as a way into talking about resurrection.

DEATH AS A CONTINUING JOURNEY

The idea of there being more to come – that the deceased’s journey or story has not yet ended - can be affirmed. ‘Lychgate commendations’ (where the congregation accompanies the coffin to the hearse for the final prayers) are a good way of enacting this and enabling mourners to say their goodbyes. However, the idea of some sort of post-mortem heroic quest or labour of penitence should be discouraged, and the grace of God in making things right emphasised.
DEATH AS GOING HOME

This is closely connected with the need to ‘place’ the deceased appropriately, and is why deciding where one might like to be buried is an important task in preparing for death. The deep instinct that death is a return to the womb of mother earth or to be again with those who first cared for us is clearly part of the rite of burial and of interment of ashes. The Bible states that we came from the earth (Genesis 2:7) but it also talks of the righteous shining like stars (Daniel 12:3). Texts like these offer a bridge to those who feel that their loved ones will become part of the physical stuff of the cosmos. However, the predominant Christian notion of homecoming is that of the eschatological banquet (Matthew 22:2; Luke 15), and it may be helpful to reflect on special family meals shared with loved ones when trying to draw out the contours of this final homecoming.

DEATH AS LIBERATION FROM CAPTIVITY

The image of the deceased as a bird or butterfly that flies high above all cares, free from physical restraint, seems to be a psychological archetype common to all cultures, and it is especially meaningful to those whose bodies and minds have let them down in life.

There are resonances with the dove of Judaeo-Christian tradition (Psalm 55; Matthew 3:16). But the traditional iconography of angels is also very important. Angels are (winged) heavenly messengers who come into their own at points where heaven touches earth, and who offer a natural bridge between folk spirituality and the Christian Gospel. Churches need to make much more of them. One possibility is to put on a series of talks about different angels in the Bible or their depiction in art, or to explore personal stories about angels. It is not uncommon for a prematurely deceased individual to be idealised and asserted to be an angel. This is part of the attempt to place the person and make sense of loss, and should be worked with sensitively; the underlying instinct that the deceased has achieved fulfilment through profound transformation is sound.
HOW PEOPLE LEARN

People have different preferred learning styles. They also have different learning histories. Some will have really enjoyed school; others may associate school with bullying, humiliation and failure. Some respond well to group discussion; others want to be talked at. Some love music and the visual arts; they leave others cold. Some like the worldwide web; others (especially older people or those on low incomes) find it difficult to access. Some want to plumb emotional and spiritual depths; others want to dip their toe in the water. When trying to facilitate exploration of death and dying it pays to have several flexible modes of delivery to suit the individual(s) and the situation. Here are some ideas:

**Talks by authoritative experts** such as funeral directors, palliative care practitioners, solicitors, GPs, hospice chaplains. If you have a series of talks it is a good idea to have a gender (and if possible ethnic) balance of speakers.

**A ‘Desert Island Discs’ event**, where people can share music that means something to them and that they want played during their last days or at their funeral (perhaps as part of a regular group such as the Mothers’ Union.)

**Creative workshops** involving poetry reading and writing, painting, drawing and other visual arts to support exploration of the meaning of death and dying, either through images provided by a facilitator for discussion, or though the participants’ expressive art efforts.

**A Christian ‘Death Café** which can be a one-off or repeated event, and at which issues around death and dying are discussed with a very light touch. The Church of England’s ‘Grave Talk’ project is an excellent resource for this (see page 21).

**Provision of literature** from key organisations displayed in a prominent place in church.

**Life review work** incorporating scrap book autobiographies or memory boxes.

**A Christian ‘bucket group’** in which members are supported in identifying and completing unfinished life business involving God and other people, and in savouring the deliciousness of life.

**A structured course** running over a number of weeks that may incorporate aspects of all the above.

**A link on the parish website** to key organisations together with a page containing theological reflections on death and dying.

**An article in the parish magazine on death and dying.**

**A prayer space** devoted to ‘departing in peace’ focused on letting go, savouring the present, and looking forward in hope, perhaps during Remembrance season or Candlemas.

**An Advent sermon series or group Bible study course** on the meaning of resurrection (for some key texts see page 22)

**A bereavement support group** that includes discussion of the topic ‘What about my death?’

**A spirituality group** in which people in the ‘fourth age’ are invited to share insights they are gaining from living in their own end times with each other, and perhaps with young people.
As many of these suggestions involve group work, some attention should be paid to managing group dynamics. These include what to do with the person who monopolises discussion, handling group conflict, drawing out those who are quiet but may have something to say (as distinct from those who do not wish to speak), dealing with an individual who becomes distressed, handling unhelpful comments from group members. This is where having at least two facilitators is important. Groups should not be too big (10-12 is an ideal number), and some ground rules about respect for difference and keeping personal information confidential to the group should be stated at the beginning and referred back to at a later stage if necessary.
GETTING THE SETTING RIGHT

Making safe enough spaces

It is important to give some thought to the context in which we have conversations about death and dying. There should always be room for people to withdraw, both physically and psychologically, from potentially distressing material. If you are running a group meeting make sure that it is easy for people to slip out without drawing attention to themselves. Try and use a room from which people can see out through windows, if possible on to a pleasant scene. Remember that church buildings can themselves hold bad memories for many people. If you are meeting with an individual it may be best to do this on neutral ground rather than in her home so that it remains a safe place for her.

People need to feel safe enough to be honest about the real questions that trouble them. An open wondering style will encourage this.

Try and strike a balance between practical content and more emotionally demanding content, and make use of gentle humour to take the pressure off as necessary.

Don’t take people by surprise – explain what you are going to do. Allow some ‘decompression time’ with a neutral activity (such as sharing tea and cake or completing a practical task) so that the move from intense engagement with questions of life and death to mundane everyday life is not too sudden. A simple inclusive prayer of blessing (e.g. Numbers 6:24-26) can both calm anxiety and mark a transition point from the serious to lighter business.

Make allowances for the attention span of the people you are working with, so that you don’t overload them. Prepare and give out written summaries of discussions to support failing memories. If you are planning a meeting, pay some attention to the timing. For example, evenings and late afternoons in winter months are difficult for elderly people, who do not like the dark and the cold weather, and these times, while associated with remembrance, can have a gloomy feel. Spring and summer are natural times to consider resurrection.
PRACTICAL AND THEOLOGICAL SOURCE MATERIALS

USEFUL ORGANISATIONS

Age UK
Tavis House, 1-6 Tavistock Square,
London WC1H 9NA
0800 169 6565
www.ageuk.org.uk

Age UK Oxfordshire
39 W St Helen St, Abingdon,
Oxfordshire OX14 5BT
01235 849400
www.ageuk.org.uk/oxfordshire/

The Church of England Funerals Project
(including ‘Grave Talk’)
www.churchofenglandfunerals.org
www.churchofenglandfunerals.org/gravetalk/

Compassion in Dying
181 Oxford Street, London W1D 2JT
0800 999 2434
www.compassionindying.org.uk

Conversations for Life
2 The Mill Yard, Staveley, Cumbria LA8 9LR
01539822343
www.conversationsforlife.co.uk

The Good Funeral Guide
www.goodfuneralguide.co.uk

The Law Society
www.lawsociety.org.uk

The National Council for Palliative Care
(including ‘Dying Matters’)
The Fitzpatrick Building, 188-194 York Way,
London N7 9AS
020 7697 1520
www.ncpc.org.uk
www.dyingmatters.org

Life Story Network
151 Dale Street, Liverpool L2 2AH
0151 237 2669
www.lifestorynetwork.org.uk

Sobell Study Centre
Sobell House, Churchill Hospital, Old Rd,
Oxford OX3 7LJ
01865 225886
www.sobelleducation.org.uk
BIBLE PASSAGES ON HEAVEN

We get glimpses of it in this life
- 2 Corinthians 12:2-4
- Isaiah 6:1-4
- Genesis 28:10-12 with John 1:51

It starts immediately

A wonderful adventure
- Philippians 3:10-14

Finally understanding
- 1 Corinthians 13:9-12

A garden
- Song of Songs 2:10-13, 6:2 with John 20:15-16.

Going home
- Hebrews 11:13-16

‘There’s a place for us’
- John 14:1-3

Being with our loved ones
- 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14, 18

At the end of time: a new heaven on earth
- Hebrews 12:22-24
- Revelation 21:1-4
FURTHER READING


CONTACT US

As a diocese we are committed to supporting work in the area of living well at the end of life and preparing for death. If you are hoping to develop a project in this area we would like to hear from you. We may well be able to help in the planning and evaluation of your project, or in sharing what you have learnt more widely. This is a field where we need more information about what works well in different situations.

Please email alison.webster@oxford.anglican.org
Alison is the Diocesan Social Responsibility Adviser

or joanna.collicutt@oxford.anglican.org
Joanna is the Diocesan Adviser on Spiritual Care for Older People (SCOP)

“I am immensely grateful to Joanna and all those who have worked with her to produce, and ‘road-test’, the wisdom and practical ideas gathered together in this booklet. I hope that it will be used in our parishes and in different groups around the diocese to help many people to ‘Live Well in the End Times’. I warmly commend it to you.”